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Trade, Law *and* Development

Vol. 17, No. 2

2026

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ISSN: 0976 - 2329
eISSN: 0975 - 3346

Trade, Law *and* Development

Vol. 17, No. 2

2026

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Cite As: Carlos Lopes, *Navigating Turbulent Waters: Africa's Key Dilemmas and Challenges*
17(2) TRADE L. & DEV. 562 (2026)

NAVIGATING TURBULENT WATERS: AFRICA'S KEY DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES

CARLOS LOPES*

The title I chose for my presentation, “Navigating Turbulent Waters”, is an indication of where I sit in the current debate. These are not gentle waves we face, but restless seas, with currents pulling in different directions. The storms we speak of are not somewhere far away; they are all around us, shaping Africa’s daily realities.

So, the question is not: are the waters turbulent? They are. The real question is: can we turn this turbulence into experience, and experience into agency?

That is the compass I want to use today.

Let me start with the moral storm.

Humanitarianism once claimed to be universal. A duty to act wherever human beings suffered. That claim has been eroded. What is left is selective empathy, filtered through politics and convenience.

Nothing illustrates this better than Gaza. What we are seeing there is not only devastation. It is a carnage playing out in real time, livestreamed to the world. Entire neighbourhoods flattened. Hospitals and schools struck. Families with nowhere left to run. The whole world watches, yet key actors stand frozen, choosing paralysis over responsibility. Gaza is the loudest siren of how far humanitarian principles have collapsed.

On our continent, the mirror image is Sudan. Since April last year, millions have been driven from their homes. Famine spreads. Cities fall into the hands of warlords. By every measure, this is one of the largest humanitarian catastrophes of our age. And yet — Sudan barely registers. Appeals are underfunded, and diplomacy is

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absent. It is not just neglect; it is as if African suffering had been erased from the global conscience.

Gaza is hyper-visible but unaddressed. Sudan is almost invisible and ignored. Together they reveal the truth: humanitarianism today is not a system of solidarity. It is a barometer of geopolitical convenience.

So, the dilemma for Africa is stark: can we still depend on outside empathy, when empathy has withered? Or must we build our own continental systems of solidarity and protection?

Let us move from the moral storm to the geopolitical one.

The multilateral order we inherited after 1945 is unravelling. Rules are applied when convenient, ignored when not. Finance, food, technology, and even migration have all been weaponized. We are not moving into a neat multipolar world, but into a fractured one, full of rival currents.

For Africa, this is paradoxical. On the one hand, the continent is indispensable:

- By 2050, one in every four people on the planet will be African.
- Africa holds nearly a third of the world's minerals, the very ones needed for the green transition.
- Our biodiversity and renewable potential are unmatched.

And yet indispensability has not translated into power. Africa is now invited to sit at the G20 table. But being at the table is not the same as choosing what is on the menu. Too often, rules are written elsewhere, and Africa is left to sign on the dotted line.

The dilemmas here are sharp:

- Symbolic inclusion, or real influence?
- Collective leverage, or the temptation of bilateral deals that weaken us?
- Opportunity in multipolar rivalry, or dependency dressed up as partnership?

The truth is that Africa cannot afford to be merely reactive. The continent must move from adaptation to assertion. That means demanding reforms to a global

financial system that punishes Africa with the world's highest borrowing costs. It means pressing for climate finance that moves from empty pledges to actual delivery. And it means claiming space in the regulation of new technologies, before the rules are locked in without us.

We can no longer drift with the currents of geopolitics. We must row with purpose. Now, let me turn to disruption.

For a long time, disruption was seen as a shock — a drought, a crisis, a coup. Something abnormal, after which normality would return. But that world is gone. Today, disruption is the operating system. The storm is not coming and going. The storm is here to stay.

That has deep consequences. If disruption is permanent, then waiting for 'stability' before moving ahead is a false horizon. Stability, as we once imagined it, will not return. The task is different: to build systems that thrive in turbulence.

That requires a mindset shift.

- Governance must become anticipatory, not reactive. We need states that do not just clean up after the flood, but plan as if the flood is certain.
- Economies must be shock-ready. The old path of heavy industrialization won't work. We need regional value chains, diversified finance, and innovation that embraces volatility rather than fears it.
- Social contracts must accept flux. Disruption brings anxiety, but it also opens space for new solidarities such as digital participation, youth-driven movements, and fresh ways of belonging.

Africa is better placed than most. This continent has always lived with turbulence. From colonial disruption to structural adjustment, from commodity crashes to pandemics — improvisation, resilience, and creativity are part of our DNA.

So, the question is not whether disruption is a threat or an opportunity. It is whether Africa can institutionalise disruption as its operating system — governing as if the storm never ends, because it does not. That would turn what others fear into a uniquely African advantage.

These three lenses bring us back to Africa's central dilemmas:

1. Neglect versus transformation: How do we respond to urgent crises like Sudan, without losing sight of structural change?
2. Presence versus influence: How do we turn seats at the table into the power to shape the agenda?
3. Coping with shocks versus thriving in turbulence: How do we move from survival mode to making disruption our strength?

These dilemmas have no easy answers. But they force us to choose clarity over drift, courage over hesitation, imagination over routine.

I. CONCLUSION

Africa has never known calm seas. Colonialism, post-independence struggles, debt crises, and climate vulnerability — turbulence has been our constant companion. But turbulence can also be a teacher.

As I wrote in my book titled “Africa in Transformation: Economic Development in the Age of Doubt”, calm waters do not produce experienced sailors. Africa’s sailors have never had calm waters. We know what being resilient is all about. Perhaps that is precisely why we are best equipped to navigate the storms of this century.

So let us not wait for the storm to pass. Let us chart a course through it and make turbulence the crucible of Africa’s renewal. Thank you.